

Just One Little Problem

January 6, 1953. Ben Varney sat at his kitchen table mulling over his problem again. Once again, as it had all those other times, it was becoming more and more obvious. Soon it would be noticeable to more than just his wife and children. Soon, it would be time for him to leave again.

The questions had already started, questions he was finding increasingly hard to answer without revealing that which few people in his life knew. Fortunately, those people were dead now, people so trusted that they took that secret to the grave with them without speaking a word of it to any other.

"Will you be okay, Honey?" came the soothing voice from behind him.

"Sorry, I was just thinking."

"Will you be alright with the kids?"

"Sure, Val." He paused for a moment as their eyes met. She knew there was more, and waited patiently for him to continue. "Val, I'm going to visit the Institute tomorrow. I don't know how long I'm going to be there, but it could be for quite some time. I want to see if they can help me. Maybe then we can get on with our lives."

She must have known this was coming. He had made several phone calls to the Institute for Genetic Research ever since he had seen that article in the paper about them. He had told her he had a physical disorder which could someday jeopardize their marriage, as it had done with his previous wife.

He looked at her now, 38 years old, and he remembered how every year she had become more beautiful. Fifteen years they had been together, raising two children. She came to him and he held her tight.

"You don't need to do this, we can make it work. What if something happens and ...", her voice trailed off into tears as she considered the worst.

"Don't worry. Chances are there isn't anything they can do. I doubt if there is anything anyone can do, but I have to try. Maybe we can learn something from this that'll help somebody else."

The sobbing subsided, but she still held on tight.

He arrived at the front gates to the Institute grounds and pre-

sented the card that had been sent to him when he made his appointment. The guard stepped back into his booth to make a security check as Ben surveyed the surroundings.

The Institute was once the Grahamsfield College. Nothing had been changed except the introduction of this and other guard posts at the roads leading in, and the twenty-foot high electric fence that surrounded the grounds.

The college never looked overly friendly to him, with its grey-stoned buildings, covered in ivy, but today it appeared even more forbidding with the grey clouds racing overhead.

"Straight ahead, leave the car in the parking garage and go to the third floor. Dr. Parker is waiting for you."

There's no turning back now, he thought as he strode through the great iron gates that swung closed and locked automatically after he had passed. I only hope there's something they can finally do.

"A most interesting case. But I'm afraid there's little we can do without a more detailed analysis. Would you be able to stay here for about two weeks? We have a room all ready for you. All you have to do is sign here and we will begin testing at once."

Ben looked at the paper handed to him by Dr. Parker. He leaned forward in his chair as Dr. Parker reclined in his plush office chair behind his large desk and turned to look out the small window.

"It simply states that in the event of your death, we have your permission to do with your body as we wish."

Ben tried to read his way through the legal gibberish, then finally gave up - if he had some chance, *any* chance, it would be worth it. He walked to the the side of the desk and made his signature with a pen he found in a brass holder.

"Excellent!", stated Dr. Parker as he stood and retrieved the form at the same time. Ben judged him to be about six-foot six. He seemed to look like the typical lab assistant, tall, thin, draped in a white lab coat that sharply contrasted his slick black hair. But, it was his eyes that were most fascinating. Even

behind his thick, metal-rimmed glasses, they looked wild.

Dr. Parker placed a thin hand on his shoulder and lead him to the door. "The secretary will see that someone takes care of your things. Good-day."

The next thing he knew, he was in the outer office. The receptionist, a blond, stocky woman in her early forties. She was on the phone when he looked at her, so he walked to the couch opposite her and looked at the magazines on the coffee table. He had only time to glance over the titles when a muscular young man in a white shirt and white pants entered.

"You will follow me to your room now," he said through a heavy German accent. As he left the room, Ben hesitated, but proceeded after his keeper when the secretary motioned with her finger toward the door.

During the next two weeks, he endured every form of testing he considered imaginable, and still they had nothing they could, or would, tell him. On the last day of his scheduled testing he was paid a visit by Dr. Parker as he lay exhausted in his bed.

"We have one more thing to do, but you must be unconscious for it. There will be no pain, only a slight discomfort when you awaken."

With that, the German orderly placed a mask firmly over his face, and the world clouded from view before he had time to think.

"Mr. Varney, how good to see you awake," began the doctor as Ben sat up in his bed with some difficulty.

"What's the up, Doc?" said Ben slowly. He still felt groggy from the operation and was finding it hard to concentrate on what the doctor was saying.

"It seems you are the product of a freak genetic mutation. You see, you lack the gene which would otherwise cause your body to age. When you were about 30, which would have been approximately 380 years ago according to your report and our tests, you ceased to age physically."

"That's all fine and wonderful, Doc, but is there any way of stopping it? Can I be fixed so I

can age and die like normal people? I know it sounds strange, but I don't want to keep living the way I am. I've lost nineteen wives over the centuries. Do you know how it feels to watch the woman you love die slowly of old age while you stay young? Do you know what it's like to have that happen to you again and again, and to know that's the way it will always be?"

"I'm getting so tired of living. I just want something to race against. I can't see an end to it all, I don't have a lifespan to help motivate me because I know I will never die. I can't bear to hurt my family the way I have hurt all my other families over the years."

"You won't have to Mr. Varney," said the doctor. He sounded more distant now than

ever. One thing was certain: he could clearly see a frightening

wildness building in the doctor's eyes. "Because you will never see them or anyone else again."

Panic began to strike Ben, but he was too weak to move. "But my wife, my children, ..." he panted, barely able to cling to consciousness.

"She has already identified your dead body. When you were having your 'operation', we actually slowed all of your bodily functions down until you appeared to be dead. Then, we had you wife identify your body after your tragic 'accident' which occurred while we were experimenting with a possible cure. After that, she was only too happy to sign the papers confirming your death, which means, now we own you." The doctor smiled a satanic smile.

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